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**Tweets as microfiction:  
on Twitter's live nature and 140 character limit as tools for developing storytelling skills**

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*For many years, the pedagogy of creative writing has been delivered primarily through workshops in which students critique each others' work. Students only need their imagination and a pen and paper to begin writing a story. It has not been necessary for creative writing teachers to prioritise use of emerging technologies and in consequence, creative writing classrooms have remained largely 'low tech and quaintly humanistic.' This interdisciplinary paper explores from a practitioner-teacher perspective how social media can help develop theory and practice in the pedagogy of creative writing. It does so by presenting an account and early stage assessment of pilots conducted using Twitter with creative writing BA students at a UK University since November 2012. It is argued that the strict character limit of tweets, in combination with their live and public nature, can force critical enquiry into what comprises a meaningful narrative. Summary reflections consider how the Twitter pilots contribute to a new theoretical position that helps bring understanding to skills it is necessary for writers to develop in the face of emerging technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

Key words:

Creative writing, pedagogy, social media, Twitter, technology, digital literacy

## Introduction

To teach creative writing, lecturers in higher education commonly use the workshop method (Allen, 1996), whereby individual students bring their compositions into class and the pieces are peer-reviewed either in small groups or by the class as a whole. Many find it to be an effective pedagogical approach. Kroll, for example, considers how, in providing an environment in which to wrestle with material, workshops help ‘build up muscle’ (2013, 107). However, some find that the workshop method has suffered through over-use. Wandor (2012) has suggested that the dominance of the workshop method, which dates back over a century (Myers, 1996, 73), should be challenged and a ‘genuinely radical overhaul of CW teaching methods’ considered.

It might be expected that creative writing lecturers would in the 21<sup>st</sup> century be keen to use social media to augment their teaching and so - whether by accident or design - begin to effect such an overhaul. Twitter in particular could seem likely to appeal to creative writing lecturers. It is primarily text-based; there is an established and growing interest in the literary world in ‘microfiction’ (or, the very short story [Nelles, 2012]), a form to which Twitter, with its 140 character limit, is well suited. Yet, there has been reluctance amongst academics to embed Twitter in the pedagogy of creative writing. Such resistance is in line with resistance across disciplines in higher education. Lewis and Rush note that despite the increasing use of Twitter in the wider community, ‘it is not yet widely accepted as a useful tool for practising educators’ (2013, 4). A Pearson survey showed that by 2013, the use of blogs and Wikis still far outweighed the use of Twitter for teaching and learning, to the extent that whereas 82.5% of set group assignments were created as blogs or Wikis, just 7.0% were created using Twitter (Seaman and Tinti-Kane 2013, 29). Reasons given in a *Faculty Focus* survey of 1,958 education professionals for resisting Twitter include: a dislike of the lightness of the name (one survey respondent said simply, ‘it’s beneath my dignity’); and, an onset of what might be called innovation fatigue (it was seen as just ‘more technological clutter’) (2009, 5-6). Taylor Suchy (2013) cites reasons for creative writing lecturers rejecting Twitter as a teaching tool that closely echo the Pearson and *Faculty Focus* survey findings. Dean Clark, Hergenrader and Rein (2015, 2) too highlight the hesitancy of creative writing to recognise ‘the importance of digital influences.’ ‘Simply put,’ they say, ‘creative writing remains more doggedly reliant on, and

rooted in, print culture than almost any other discipline.’ Consequently, it remains the case that ‘In spite of calls for more digital engagement and the fact that students are arriving on campus with digitally connected skills,’ as Taylor Suchy notes, ‘creative writing classrooms are generally “low tech and quaintly humanistic”.’

The research problem addressed in this paper is, can Twitter be used to help students develop creative writing skills in the classroom and, if so, what skills in particular can it help students develop and how? The contention is that the strict character limit of tweets, in combination with their live and public nature, can force critical enquiry into what comprises a meaningful narrative. The methodology used involved devising an exercise to conduct with Creative Writing BA students along with accompanying evaluation sheets. Using them together, the exercises and evaluation sheets would, it was hoped, test this hypothesis. This paper is an account of and reflection on exercises conducted with students in two creative writing classes at a UK University between November 2012 and March 2013 using the accompanying evaluation sheets. As well as considering what the students’ statements on the evaluation sheets say about what they learnt from the Twitter exercises, the paper addresses the disjuncture between the gains students judge that they have made and gains they have made from a teacher/practitioner’s perspective. The aim is to begin to delineate the effectiveness of Twitter as a tool with which to help build creative writing skills. This paper represents an early stage assessment and is part of ongoing research.

### **The form: tweets**

Reasons given in the *Faculty Focus* report for rejecting Twitter as a learning tool include the 140 character limit. One respondent said: ‘Because of the brevity of the Twitter comments, I have not deemed it to be beneficial for meaningful communication’ (2009, 8). Yet, as Nelles and Hershman (2013) amongst others make clear, it is not only the case that brief narratives can constitute meaningful communications, but, such communications have a long history.

Jorge Luis Borges is considered ‘an international phenomenon’ (Bell-Villada, 1999, 6) as well as ‘one of the great writers of the twentieth century and the most influential author in the

Spanish language of modern times' (Williamson, 2013, 1). He was known for writing very short stories, including 'Toenails' (1999, 296), a narrative that is 147 words long. The Japanese verse form, haiku, which dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, contains just seventeen syllables, and is considered a means to discover 'inner truth' (Addiss, 2012, 3).

Twitter was founded as a Web-based Internet instant messaging chat service in 2006. As well as for Web-based chat, Twitter provides opportunities for users to disseminate very short stories. Twitter gained respectability as a fiction platform relatively quickly. Coining the term 'hint fiction' for stories of 25 words or fewer, Robert Swartwood started the @Hint\_Fiction Twitter account in 2009. In 2012, Jennifer Egan (2012) published a story in tweet-sized segments via the *New Yorker's* Twitter account. The *Guardian* now publishes Twitter fiction regularly, by writers including Naomi Alderman, Jim Crace and Deborah Levy. Considering Twitter, Clark (2014: 5) suggests, 'Just as the trauma of the First World War produced the fragmentary streams of consciousness of modernism, perhaps the age of social will produce a new literary movement to capture its reshaping of reality.'

Very short stories have been given a number of labels, including, as well as 'hint fiction,' "microfiction," "flash fiction," "sudden fiction," (Nelles, 87). It is often assumed that very short stories emerged as a genre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with, or indeed were forged by social media. In fact, as Hershman (2013) notes, Shapard and Thomas's collection, *Sudden Fiction: American Short Short Stories*, was published in 1986. Nelles points to fables as early examples of microfiction and notes that Julius Caesar's 'veni, vidi, vici' can in its totality be considered a full, dynamic narrative (91).

The maximum and minimum word lengths cited of 'hint fiction,' 'microfiction,' 'flash fiction,' 'sudden fiction' vary. As noted, Swartwood sets 25 words as the limit of 'hint fiction.' Nelles's (89) selects 'microfiction' as his preferred term and 700 words as the maximum length. The *Writers' Digest* website suggests that 'flash fiction' can feature as many as 1,500 or as few as 300 words (<http://www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/by-writing-goal/improve-my-writing/flash-fiction-faqs>). The 'sudden fiction' in Shapard and Thomas's 1986 collection is 'from one to five pages long' (xiii). Clearly, tweets with their 140 character limit fit all these definitions comfortably.

Indeed, by some measures, a tweet could be considered luxuriously long. A very short story that is generally attributed to Ernest Hemingway reads: 'Baby shoes. For sale. Never worn'

(Swartwood, 2010, 21). At only six words long, this story is vivid. It has the kind of ambiguity of meaning that is associated with literary fiction. It can be interpreted in different ways. A reader could assume that the shoes are for sale because the baby died or because the baby grew out of them before having a chance to put them on, so that the story can be perceived as either poignant or life-affirming. It uses a mere 33 characters. “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot,” says E.M. Forster (1961, 147), demonstrating how fundamentally the inclusion or omission of two short words can transform the meaning and effect of a sentence.

Before considering the Twitter exercises, a word on terminology. Swartwood’s definition of ‘hint fiction’ is, ‘a story of 25 words or fewer that *suggests a larger, more complex story*’ (my italics). That is, Swartwood’s term suggests a lack. ‘Sudden’ and ‘flash’ both suggest that sudden/flash fiction can be quickly read and set aside. The contention in this paper is that full, fully engaging narratives can be contained in tweet-sized stories. In line with Nelles, the term ‘microfiction’ is favoured here when referring to very short fiction.

## **The exercises: rationale**

### ***Brevity***

Rather than being too brief to be ‘beneficial’, then, tweets feature sufficient character-length to present complex meanings and so have the potential to be useful as part of a pedagogical package in the context of a creative writing class. Before devising the exercises intended to facilitate measurement of the usefulness of Twitter as a tool for developing creative writing skills, attention was paid to which aspects of the craft of story-writing Twitter might help students with.

Twitter could help motivate the students to, quite simply, start. Many writers have spoken of the difficult moment when they face a blank page. ‘A blank page is actually a whitewashed wall with no door and no window. Beginning to tell a story is like making a pass at a total stranger,’ says the writer Amos Oz (1999, 2). It is not unusual to see creative writing students at their desks immobilized by the challenge of choosing a first word. A blank page

suggests other blank pages. The magnitude of the task of filling these blank pages can lead the aspiring writer to feel before they have begun that the task is impossible. Using predictive text, a tweet can be completed in seconds. A student can find that they have finished a story before they have had time to lose confidence in the manner suggested by Oz.

Conversely, once a student has started filling an A4 pad or a computer screen, he or she can find it hard to stop. In 'Words Words Words,' Singleton and Sutton warn of how 'One word becomes two, then three, then many' (1996). Students can add clause after clause without necessarily adding to the meaning or impact of their story. While devising the exercises, it was surmised that the 140 character limit of tweets could help loquacious students appreciate the benefits of, and experiment with, more careful editing practice than they might habitually engage in.

In addition to helping the students generate a draft and then commit time and effort to editing, it was judged too that Twitter could help the students see the importance of establishing a sound structure. At just six words long, the story 'Baby shoes. For sale. Never worn' has a full narrative arc. A key character is conjured with the first word, 'Baby.' 'For sale' thickens the narrative by suggesting other characters – the parents who are selling the shoes – and raising the question of why the shoes are for sale. As indicated, the answer ('Never worn') provides an end that can evoke bereaved parents or a fast-growing toddler. The story captures the reader's interest, holds their attention and draws them to a conclusion. 'A narrative must advance to its end whilst simultaneously delaying it, and in lingering, as it were, a narrative occupies a space' (Cobley 2001, 12). The baby shoes story is less than a third of the length of a tweet. It occupies a small amount of space. Yet, it has a clear beginning, middle and end. Just as it is likely to be easier to see how the building blocks of a two-bedroom bungalow fit together than those of a sprawling museum or shopping mall, in stories that occupy a smaller narrative space, it can be easier for students to see the component parts of the structure.

### ***Live and public***

If brevity were the only pedagogical aim, however, students could be asked to write very short stories and submit them using traditional methods, for example on paper. In devising a class exercise, issues considered included whether it would be possible to make the immediacy of

Twitter – the fact that it is live and public – a beneficial and central rather than incidental element.

Solitude, as presented in texts such as *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 1992), has long been considered a state that serious writers should aspire to. Although workshops by their nature involve working with others, in creative writing classes, they tend to require students to produce and polish material separately from the group and only bring it in for appraisal once finished. Thus workshops, despite being group activities, help perpetuate the idea that the best creative work is done in isolation. However, most writers find this ideal of a protected, solitary work environment impossible to attain as they negotiate everyday practicalities, such as the need to get and keep a 'day job' (Lahire 2010). Increasingly social media makes demands on writers that break up working days, inviting users to post regularly to help build author platforms (Wilkins 2014). Twitter could both help students consider critically the image of a serious writer as someone who writes in isolation, and help them face the reality of the need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for writers to engage in self-promotion.

In addition, the live, public nature of Twitter could help students learn how to edit at speed. As noted already, the enforced brevity of tweets can help students think critically about the impact of each edit and thus develop their close-editing skills. Writers often have to work to deadline, whether the deadline is the time they have before paid work starts, or the deadline of a story competition. It was surmised that the Twitter exercise would provide a deadline and that, if students experienced meeting this deadline, this could help develop the students' confidence.

### **The exercises: practicalities**

To explore these potential benefits through a single exercise, it was necessary to conduct the exercise live in class. A key practical question to address was how to swiftly gather the tweets and display them to enable critical discussion as a group while the process of composing the tweets was still fresh in students' minds.

Hashtags were utilised in combination with Storify. Hashtags (or, hash signs that are placed immediately before particular words or phrases) are used to help social media users



identify posts on selected topics. Hashtagged tweets can be gathered using Storify (<https://storify.com/>), a site that enables users to ‘curate’ social network posts by offering users the option of creating a ‘New Story’. Once the ‘New Story’ icon is clicked, the screen splits in two. Posts from Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and/or Instagram, for example, can be gathered on one side of the screen, and selections from that internet-wide search can be taken to the other side of the screen, where a ‘storified’ narrative can then be created with additional comments inserted between the selected posts.

When conducting the exercises in class, first, the students were told the set topic and what hashtag they should feature in their tweets. Using Storify, the collected tweets were then projected onto the smart board and these micro-narratives were arranged into a single ‘storified’ narrative, so that, as well as the structure of individual tweets, the process of joining the tweets in a larger structure could be discussed with the students.

### **The exercises: measuring**

#### ***First impressions, practitioner-teacher perspective***

At the start of the film *Parental Guidance* (Fickman 2012), Billy Crystal’s character, the aged misanthrope Artie Decker, is sacked from his job as a baseball announcer. He has been the ‘voice of the Grizzlies’ for years but now he is ‘dead wood,’ says his young supervisor, because Artie has never ‘poked’ anyone on Facebook, he does not even tweet.

‘I’ll make whatever noise you want,’ pleads Artie.

The point in the context of this paper is: *Parental Guidance* is a mainstream film. Its opening suggests that any young person who steps into Artie Decker’s job will be a ‘digital native,’ able to easily and eloquently use social media in any part of their lives, social or professional. This assumption is widely held. The experience of conducting the Twitter exercises assessed here suggests that it is misguided.

The autumn 2012 class in which the exercise was first conducted, a Wednesday seminar group, comprised 1<sup>st</sup> year BA students. As they were aged around 18 to 22, it seemed likely in the light of cultural influences such as *Parental Guidance* that the students would be digital natives and, consequently, that a brief explanation would suffice. The first part of the exercise

only required the students to write a tweet on a set subject, feature a set hashtag and press 'Tweet' so that their submissions could be collected via Storify. The responses were a surprise.

It seemed none of the students had heard of Storify, some said they did not own smart phones and, of those who did, a significant number did not have Twitter accounts. All the students appeared bemused by the proposal at first. Some were resistant.

The Twitter exercise was explained more fully. Ground rules were detailed, including a reminder that Twitter is public (students were given the opportunity to open an anonymous Twitter account for the purposes of the exercise; they were told that there should be 'nothing rude'). A number of tweets that came through on the set hashtag early on indicated that the students were being 'forced' to tweet.

After an uncertain start, however, the response to the exercise was enthusiastic.

### ***Gains, student perspective***

Student A, rebellious initially, became very engaged. During the course, the group had been considering Joe Orton's play, *What the Butler Saw* (1998). Using Twitter, Student A felt able to articulate concepts that were new to her. For example, of dramatic writing she tweeted: 'So a pause is different from a beat. A pause is a moment for the audience to reflect and a beat is a small moment in speech'. She tweeted, 'I love this class. ☺'. Later, she said of the exercise: 'I found it really fun and versatile'.

A number of versions of the exercise were conducted between November and March with two first year classes and a third year class. Participating students were invited to complete evaluation sheets. Set topics for the exercises included the plays the students were working on (Joe Orton's *What The Butler Saw* and April de Angelis's *Jumpy* [2011]), and the pleasures of reading. The focus of the first year class was drama and non-fiction and the focus of the third year class was creative non-fiction, and the topics set were all non-fiction, so the creative non-fiction learning objectives were featured on the evaluation sheets.

The learning objectives were arranged in boxes in a column down the left-hand side of the page. On the right-hand side of the page, there was a space beside each learning objective in which the students could write 'Yes', 'No' or 'NA' and give comments regarding whether the

exercise had helped with a particular learning objective and if so, how. A box was also provided at the end of the sheet for any general comments on the exercise.

The evaluation sheets were assessed quantitatively (how many students said 'yes' and/or recorded similar responses to which questions, for example) and qualitatively (from a teacher-practitioner perspective). As the evaluation sheets were not part of any assessment, the students were not obliged to fill them in.

The responses were mainly positive. Of the 17 evaluation sheets returned in the Wednesday class, against the nine learning objectives, out of a possible 153 'yes'/'no'/'NA' answers, there were 77 'yes's (the Twitter exercise had helped the student meet that particular learning objective), and there were three 'no's.

Additional comments from the students included:

'Given me confidence' (Student B);

'This helped me to condense a story and make it interesting within 140 characters' (Student C);

'Several different techniques discussed. Interesting implementation' (Student E);

'new filter to apply critique'(Student F);

'Yes, it's made me think about the different ways that I can market my work in a contemporary way' (Student G).

[TO INSERT NEAR HERE as a box:]

[The evaluation sheets asked:

Knowledge: has this exercise helped:

K1. enrich your awareness of range of writers' approaches to different forms of non-fiction?;

K2. your ability to generate and articulate critical and/or creative ideas;

K3. your ability to analyse and evaluate creative methods and techniques and exercise judgement in critical discussion;

K4. your awareness of market and contemporary publishing opportunities.

Skills: has this exercise helped:

- S1. your ability to write non-fiction in a range of forms;
- S2. your ability to reflect critically on the non-fiction prose of others;
- S3. your ability to research and present material;
- S4. Improvement your presentation skills in reading;
- S5. your ability to recognize and evaluate market opportunities.]

### ***Reflection on initial resistance***

In considering students' initial resistance, Hew's review of 'published research studies focusing on the use of Facebook' is pertinent. Hew concludes that 'Facebook has very little educational use' primarily because students consider it 'a tool to get away from study' (2011). It is likely that a similar student-response applies to Twitter. One student said that she did not want other students following her.

In addition, it seems that, in framing Twitter as a potential work tool, the Twitter exercises led students to think ahead to a time when they might begin to compete in the postgraduate job market. The proximity to graduation may account for the striking difference between the evaluation from the first and third year students. Compared to the 17 overwhelmingly positive evaluation sheets from the first years' '#luvreading' exercise, only eight third year students returned evaluation sheets at all following the equivalent exercise in their class. Some of the third year evaluation sheets were distinctly negative. To the question of whether the Twitter exercise had helped the third years meet the module's nine learning objectives, out of a possible 72 'yes'/'no'/'NA' answers, the third year class evaluation forms featured 42 'yes's and 21 'no's. That is, the proportion of 'yes's from the first and third year students was quite similar. However, whereas 2% of the possible answers were 'no' on the first years' evaluation sheets, 29% of the possible answers were 'no' on the third years' evaluation sheets.

For many of the third year students, it seems that the Twitter exercises simply came too near the end of their studies. The Twitter exercises were not part of their final assessment and

therefore could not directly help secure them higher marks. Some found it hard to consider that the exercise might have value.

The third year students' negative comments do not mitigate against the exercise, however. Negative comments tended to be from students who did not submit tweets. The third year students who engaged with the exercise gave almost entirely positive feedback.

In addition, the Twitter exercises can be conducted quickly and easily. If there are students who have difficulty engaging with the exercise, there is a low risk that they will feel too much time has been, in their view, 'wasted.'

Furthermore, as a long-standing practitioner-teacher it is possible to see that the Twitter exercises helped the students in ways that they were not necessarily able to articulate or recognize immediately.

### ***Logistics***

When planning Twitter exercises such as those described here, there are practical issues to take account of. It is important to check that a hashtag is free beforehand (otherwise, if a popular hashtag is chosen, Storify's search function could pull up an unmanageable number of tweets). It is helpful to inform the students the previous week that they will be tweeting, in order that they bring their phones, and charge them prior to the class.

### ***Gains, practitioner-teacher perspective***

#### ***Structuring and editing skills***

Key benefits of the exercises included, as anticipated, that they helped the students develop their structuring and editing skills. The shortness of the form and live nature sharpened the students' critical faculties, encouraging them to make critical judgements with speed as a priority.

A more traditional class exercise used to develop structuring and editing skills involves distributing hand-outs of extracts by published writers which the students are required to assess. Depending on the size of the extract, they may be given as long as twenty minutes. The students

can make notes in the margins and re-read the piece as they consider their response and how they might articulate it, and then the piece is discussed critically as a group. Hard-copy hand-outs remain a valuable learning tool.

During the exercises assessed here, the students were required to generate the tweets that would make up the story then structure the story before the session finished. The deadline was quite tight. Once the set hashtag had been searched using Storify and the students' tweets displayed at the front of the class on the right hand side of the smart board, decisions were made immediately about which tweets should be pulled over to the left hand side, into the story. The process of editing the stream of tweets with peers contemporaneously in class helped students understand that decisions that might initially feel arbitrary were in fact informed by principles of fiction they had studied already during their course. Words such as 'inspiration' are suggestive of something that cannot be harnessed. In place of words such as 'inspiration', Melrose (2006) uses the term 'expert-intuition' to describe a practitioner's method for decision-making during a creative project. The experience for a student of finding that he or she was not alone in judging that a tweet about being deeply absorbed in reading as better for the middle of a '#luvreading' story than the beginning or the end, for example, encouraged them to re-frame what had felt like gut responses as expert-intuition. In the process of discussing why their expert-intuition had led them to make particular judgements, the students gained confidence not only in the value of those immediate responses but also in their ability to explain them using valid terminology.

This new confidence feeds the students' own story-telling skills directly. If the students can see how to edit others' work, they have gained some of the tools they need to achieve the degree of objectivity that is necessary to do the same to their own creative pieces.

### *Understanding market*

As indicated by Student G's comment ('it's made me think about the different ways that I can market my work'), the exercises led the students to think about Twitter as a tool for self-promotion. The exercises also enabled the students to begin considering market from the viewpoint of a commissioning editor. Sometimes tweets were picked not because they were the richest or most eloquent but because they fitted either pre-determined editorial decisions or the arc of the story that was developing.

For example, for the ‘#luvreading’ exercise conducted with first and third year classes, before any tweets were posted, it was possible to judge that if any mentioned favourite books from childhood, those could be appropriate as opening tweets, since the story arcs could then be chronological, starting with tweets illustrating times early on in our reading lives. Such tweets did come in. One ‘#luvreading’ story began, ‘My first reads and favourite reads growing up were the entertaining Biff, Chip and Kipper stories’ (for information about the Oxford University Press Biff, Chip and Kipper stories see

<http://www.oup.com/oxed/primary/oxfordreadingtree/resources/biff/>). Another ‘#luvreading’ story’s opening tweet said simply, ‘hairy maclary from donaldson’s dairy’ (for information about Lynley Dodd’s bestselling Hairy Maclary children’s picture books see <http://www.puffin.co.uk/nf/Author/AuthorPage/0,,1000023350,00.html>).

During previous seminars, it had been explained to the students how editors of newspapers and short story collections choose pieces not only on the basis of the standard of the work submitted but also with broader themes in mind. That is, three separate writers could submit stories of an equally high standard, but if the editor has selected love as a theme, for example, the story that is most clearly about love is likely to be chosen. The students saw an enactment of such an editorial process in the class.

It is a harsh lesson, perhaps, but an important one, and the Twitter exercise enabled the students to experience it in a context in which their confidence was unlikely to be badly damaged. The tweets were composed quickly. Due to the way the exercise was scheduled, the students *could not* invest a great deal of time in their composition and consequently were less likely to be adversely affected if they were not selected. The students could experiment to see if they could target a market.

It was not only the work by students who grasped the concept of targeting a market that featured, though. Tweets about children’s books were good ways of starting ‘#luvreading’ stories; tweets about finishing books, for example, were good ways of concluding them. However, the main body of each story was themed according to the tweets that emerged from the class. In a class of between 15 and 20 students, it is possible to ensure that at least one tweet from every student who contributed is included in the story. Once the tweets have been collected, structure decided and linking comments written, the Storify icon that is clicked is: ‘Publish’. In the classroom, the students saw their work on the screen, ‘published’.

### *Grammar*

It could reasonably be said that anyone who starts a Twitter account has begun ‘publishing’ his or her work. Each Twitter user is his or her own editor. There need be no consideration of grammar. A criticism of Twitter by *Faculty Focus* respondents is that it encourages students to be careless, about punctuation, for example. ‘Lol’, ‘omg’ and ‘natch’ (which stand for ‘laugh out loud’, ‘oh my god’ and ‘naturally’ respectively) and emoticons including smiley faces may all feature in tweets. It could be considered unwise to suggest to students that grammatically incorrect statements are ‘publishable’.

Grammar is something that many students find daunting. Fear of it can make their writing stilted. In *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant talks about the ‘spontaneity in the play of the cognitive faculties’ (1964, 39); he speaks of the importance of free play between the imagination and understanding. The word ‘play’, is important in this assessment.

Although, many students were initially wary of the proposal that social media (something they associated with their leisure time) should be part of the pedagogy of creative writing, once they had become engaged in the exercise, the fact that they associated Twitter with leisure seemed to help them feel more able to experiment. As noted, one student tweeted, ‘hairy maclary from donaldson’s dairy’. There are no capitals in this tweet. There is no full stop. However, there is a correct apostrophe. This single apostrophe indicates that the lack of capitals is intentional. Thus, this tweet by an adult about a work of children’s literature can feel simultaneously child-like and knowing. When it is used in class exercises, Twitter can invite students to pay closer attention to detail.

Students can assume that long words and complex sentences are marks of ‘good’ writing. Twitter helps them see the value of working to say what you want to say in the simplest, most direct way possible. As George Orwell notes in his essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, ‘If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy’ (1971, 157). The more the students did the exercise, the more grammatically knowing and/or correct their tweets became.

### *Writer’s block*

The way in which Twitter legitimized play also helped students overcome writer’s block.



The fact that Twitter is widely perceived as trivial (by *Faculty Focus* respondents, as noted above, for example) contributed to easing students' fear of the blank page/screen. In his book *The Story Begins*, Oz (1999) writes about the contracts writers such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Camus establish with readers at the start of their novels. When viewed in this way, Twitter is a forgiving form. Part of the contract with Twitter could be articulated as: *Cut me slack, I only have 140 characters*. Some students posted six or seven tweets within a short time-span for a single exercise, knowing that one or two at most would be used in the final story.

### **New Theoretical Position**

As well as with structuring and editing skills, understanding market, grammar and writer's block, the Twitter exercises considered in this paper helped the students learn skills that are new and increasingly essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for writers. Emerging technologies – or, 'synaptic technologies' as Harper (2015, 7-11) frames them - are changing how writers must work. Previously, novelists relied on publishers to market their books. Today, practicing and aspiring writers find that they have to embrace 'reciprocal connectedness' (Harper, 11) in order to publicise themselves using social media, regularly, throughout each day. They must (Barnard, 2015) become multimodal writers, that is, flexible enough in their creative practice to be able to move between different types of writing for different modes of dissemination often within small time-frames.

On BBC Radio 4's *Saturday Live*, Caitlin Moran - a writer who is known for her prolific Twitter output - was asked by the presenter, the Rev. Richard Coles (2013), if Twitter has altered the way she writes. Coles said that novels require a sustained imaginative arc, whereas tweets are tiny. In fact, Moran noted, as well as Twitter and a novel she was, in addition to her regular columns for *The Times*, working on two films and a sitcom. Moran said that she did not find switching between types of writing difficult: 'It's like walking into different rooms.'

Moran is not alone in finding that working on a multiplicity of projects within a single time-frame is stimulating and enjoyable. However, for more writers, switching between forms if it has to be done frequently is challenging.

Charles Dickens is a writer who is noteworthy for his ability to move between types of writing. His text output included novels, short stories, plays and articles. In addition, he was a magazine editor and gave readings and speeches all over the world. As a young man, he learned shorthand. Clearly, his later success cannot be attributed solely to the fact that, as a ‘writing clerk’ with ambitions to become a reporter in the press gallery of the House of Commons, he mastered shorthand, with its ‘dots and lines and circles and squiggles and “marks like flies’ legs”’ (Ackroyd 1990, 124). However, it is significant that Dickens was interested in different modes of communication from the outset. It is striking that early on, he learned adaptability.

The Twitter exercises did not occupy entire seminar sessions. During each class in which they featured, students were also required to submit and consider work in conventional formats (extended narratives and essays on paper or via electronic submission). Within the class, with support and guidance, the students were moving between different types of writing. They were applying storytelling techniques to non-fiction outputs and critical thought to writing for different media. The Twitter exercises helped the students consider how to at once develop their own voices and finesse different modulations of those distinct voices for different outlets.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, then, using the methodology described, the hypothesis of this paper is supported.

The majority of the students indicated on the evaluation forms that the Twitter exercises helped them meet *all* the learning objectives. Their editing and writing skills were honed. They gained confidence in their critical judgements and insights into how publishing markets work. They also gained from the exercises knowledge and skills including spontaneity and adaptability.

The Twitter exercises are part of a wider context. They are just part of a pedagogical toolkit that features, for example, traditional workshop methods, mini-lectures, power-points, guest lecturers and assessment of extracts by published authors. However, exercises using social media can be considered an important component.

In her foreword to *The Internet: A Writer’s Guide*, Deborah Moggach (2000, vi) echoes the reticence about exploring new developments such as social media voiced by Pearson

respondents (Seaman and Tinti-Kane 2013). Moggach writes about how hard she found it in 1990 after working on a typewriter for decades to upgrade to a computer. Ten years after the challenge of first using a computer, she found beginning to use the internet equally unnerving. She describes well how visceral the fear of new technology can be: ‘Our bond with our tools is a profound and secret one; if we venture into the new technology, will we somehow lose our voice?’

Keeping pace with technological change can feel both tiring and dangerous. However, the digital landscape is in a constant state of flux. Many writers today find that they must, whether they are happy about it or not, learn how to move quickly and regularly between writing for different modes of dissemination and find ways of ‘enabling diverse activities and writing projects to inform and enrich each other’ (Barnard, 2015, 103). As Moggach notes (vi), overcoming fears of technological change is in the new millennium an imperative for writers. If it is an imperative for writers, it is an imperative for those who teach creative writing.

### **Notes on Contributor:**

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